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November 3, 1975
SC No. 00535/75

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Approved For Release 2001/08/08 : CIA-RDP79T00865A002100020001-7

EAST ASIA

This publication is prepared for regional specialists in the Washington community by the East Asia - Pacific Division, Office of Current Intelligence, with occasional contributions from other offices within the Directorate of Intelligence. Comments and queries are welcome. They should be directed to the authors of the individual articles.

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Striking for the Right To Strike:
Labor Belabors Prime Minister Miki [redacted]

25X1A

Organized labor and the Japanese government are heading for another confrontation over the right to strike for public employees. Later this month, the National Railway Workers Union, *Kokuro*, plans to launch a series of nationwide strikes designed to coincide with the release of a long-awaited official report--and a supposedly definitive government decision--on the issue.

As in the past, the campaign is certain to receive heavy play from the union's opposition party allies in the Diet. Unlike earlier battles, however, it has generated some controversy within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party where Prime Minister Miki and the party leadership have yet to reach a final consensus on the government's position. Despite labor union and opposition party pressures, however, the government is unlikely to make any significant concession to labor's demands, and Miki may well seek to sidetrack the problem by deferring a decision until next year.

The Right to Strike Issue

Although Japan's constitution gives all workers the right to organize and to bargain collectively, labor laws and government policy concerning civil servants have been far more restrictive. For the more than 500,000 employees of the national government and the 2.5 million working for prefectures and local authorities, collective bargaining is limited and strikes are categorically denied.

The unions' major battle for the right to strike centers, however, on the employees of Japan's three government corporations and five national enterprises. For these 1.2 million workers--employed by

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the National Railway, Telephone/Telegraph and various monopoly corporations, and the post office, forestry service, printing bureau, mint and alcohol enterprise --labor law allows their unions to bargain collectively, but substitutes compulsory arbitration for the right to strike.

Essentially, the public sector unions argue that the government has proscribed their ultimate collective bargaining weapon by denying the right to strike. Despite the law, the unions' annual wage struggles have consistently used such measures as work slowdowns, mass absences, and spot strikes. As a result, the government has meted out stiff penalties to their members--fines, suspensions, and reprimands --for the actions.

This cycle of strikes, fines, and more strikes is a major--and expensive--factor in the union campaign for the right to strike. Because the unions are obligated to reimburse members who are discharged as well as those who are suspended or fined, the penalties place a significant burden on their treasuries. *Kokuro*, for example, has paid out more than $36 million in strike benefits to its railway workers since the mid-1950s, while payments by *Zentei*, the Postal Workers Union, have reportedly exceeded $25 million.

Union Politics Plays a Role

Legal claims and union finances are not the only factors compelling labor to force a slowdown; the organization and politics of the labor movement also play a major role.

Like labor unions in private industry, Japan's public sector unions are organized on a company-by-company basis with all employees of a single concern belonging to the same union. To coordinate their activities, the unions have banded together; for

public employees *Korokyo*--the Council of Public Corporations and Government Enterprises Workers Unions--speaks for the majority of their labor unions.

Korokyo, in turn, is a member organization of *Sohyo*, the General Council of Trade Unions, the most powerful of Japan's four nationwide labor federations. Although *Sohyo* represents public and private unions alike, *Korokyo* and its constituent unions wield heavy clout; they comprise almost 3 million of the 4.3 million *Sohyo* members and are generally the most militant participants in its annual labor struggles.

The concern of *Sohyo* with the problems of its public sector unions is also influenced by its own internal politics. Since the 1950s, the Council has maintained a close political alliance with the Japan Socialist Party (JSP). As a result of growing grassroots support for the Japan Communist Party (JCP) in the ranks of the *Sohyo* public sector unions, however, a number of pro-JCP unions have challenged the *Sohyo*-JSP alignment under the guise of seeking *Sohyo* endorsement of "freedom of political choice"--a codeword for ending the council's exclusive support for the JSP.

Last July, the Council's leadership--its mainstream--successfully blocked the proposal at the *Sohyo* general convention where all the major public sector labor unions voted against it. Still, leadership is well aware that the JCP-inspired challenge could make further headway, and they are highly unlikely to concede the initiative on any issue like the right to strike which is crucial to public sector unions.

In the Government's Court

Government strategy on the right to strike has involved the carrot as well as the stick over the years and official representatives have participated with union leaders in a variety of special study

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groups, ostensibly aimed at resolving the controversy. The tactic has most often served to buy time and defuse union pressures; it was last used during the 1974 spring wage struggle when Prime Minister Tanaka agreed to set up a cabinet-level commission to study the issue and make recommendations by the end of 1975. With the commission's decision due later this month, Tanaka's ploy has brought the right to strike problem home to roost for Prime Minister Miki.

Pressure has been building for some weeks. Last month, the presidents of Japan's three public corporations reversed their field by announcing their official support for giving the right to strike--albeit heavily qualified--to their employees. This move caused some dismay among LDP leaders, since the public corporation presidents are LDP appointees and in this case failed to consult the party in advance.

The commission's advisory council of experts, moreover, is reportedly considering a recommendation in favor of a conditional grant of the strike right to some public sector unions, although they have apparently excluded the railway and postal workers --the two unions at the center of the controversy.

Miki in the Middle

While these developments have undoubtedly given labor encouragement, Prime Minister Miki has maintained a cautious stance, taking care not to place himself too far in front of his party on the issue. Most important, the LDP has yet to reach a consensus; it is reportedly divided between those favoring some flexibility and adamant right-wing opponents of union demands. As a result, a number of party leaders, including secretary general Nakasone and vice president Shiina, are now advocating further delay on any government decision. Their position is doubtless designed, among other things, to shortstop

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Socialist Party plans to use this month's labor-government confrontation to disrupt the current Diet session when a number of crucial revenue bills will be under consideration--and perhaps force its dissolution.

For his part, Miki is unlikely to see any gains from offering immediate concessions. Public sympathy for the union cause has been diminishing. Tokyo's sensational commuter riots directed against striking railway workers in 1973, combined with the widespread lack of popular support on the issue--even among private sector unions--in this year's spring labor struggles are obvious indications of the unions' problems. Miki, moreover, is well aware that any missteps in his handling of the issue could be put to good use by his party rivals. He has already moved to cover his flanks by assigning Shiina the job of fashioning the party's consensus.

In any event, barring any major Diet confrontation, the Prime Minister doubtless calculates that discretion is the better part of valor, and he is unlikely to take any position on the right to strike which could jeopardize his current intraparty truce before the end of the current Diet session. (CONFIDENTIAL)

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Approved For Release 2001/08/08 : CIA-RDP79T00865A002100020001-7

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